

Introduction - The Corpus Vitrearum Project

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*"Even today we hardly understand the language of the stained-glass window,"*¹

Stained glass, or 'stained and painted glass,' as it was once known in English, was the major medium of monumental painting in European lands north of the Alps and Pyrenees in the middle ages. Yet glass paintings may constitute the least well-understood body of art historical material available for analysis. Both the nature of subjects originally rendered in glass, and this material's extreme vulnerability to iconoclasm and pollution, have necessitated a different approach than that used by historians of other forms of painting. The study of glass as a special sub-field has come into its own, thanks to the efforts of the *Corpus Vitrearum*, whose publications are beginning to effect a change in the canons of art history.

The study of monumental stained glass of the medieval and renaissance periods has been sporadically inspired by threats to its very existence. Thus it was that after the iconoclasms of the 16th and 17th centuries. English antiquarians made notes and sketches of some of the remaining glass. So too, after the Revolution in France, and the destruction wrought by the Napoleonic Wars, scholars worked alongside the restorers in order to establish iconographic readings.² Another such period was occasioned by the World Wars of this century; in the First War irreparable damage was caused to the glass left in position in French buildings, and this in turn brought attention to the fact that much of it had never been fully inventoried or photographed.³ The first complete descriptions, with photographic documentation, of the windows in the Cathedrals of Chartres and Rouen were published within a decade of the armistice.⁴ The Second War posed the next threat to European patrimony, and it was in the immediate post-war period – in fact at the first International Congress of the History of Art to be held after the war (Lisbon, 1949) – that a group of scholars, began to plan a

systematic inventory of all the extant medieval glass preserved in its monumental setting.⁵

At the Congress in Amsterdam in 1952 this cataloguing project, named the *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi*, was brought before the Comité International de l'Histoire de l'Art for its official approval and support, under the leadership of Hans Hahnloser. The patronage of the Union Académique Internationale followed in 1956. During a brief five-year period, subventions for publication were made available by the Comité Internationale de Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines (CIPSCH) of UNESCO. In the 1950s an extraordinary group of scholars contributed to glass studies; Walter Frodl in Austria, Jonny Roosval in Sweden, and Hans Wentzel in Germany had already begun inventories. 1953 saw the installation of the first major exhibition of stained glass in France (at least since the section of the Great Exhibition of 1884), with a catalogue by Louis Grodecki.

With a dynamic group of senior and younger scholars at once involved in the *Corpus* project, several publications followed very quickly; Switzerland was first, with a volume comprising all the early medieval glass (up to the early fourteenth century), authored by Hahnloser's doctoral student, Ellen Beer (1956). Two years later Hans Wentzel's volume on the glass of Swabia appeared. By 1959 Jean Lafond had prepared the entries for Notre Dame of Paris, and Louis Grodecki for the Sainte Chapelle; their volume came out with the editorial aplomb of Marcel Aubert and Jean Verrier. In 1961 Jean Helbig published all the glass up to 1500 in Belgium, and the decision was made to extend the Belgian *Corpus* through the sixteenth century. In 1962 Eva Frodl-Kraft published the magnificent glass in Vienna, while by 1964 all the glass of the Scandinavian countries had been studied, and it was published in one German-language volume under the leadership of Jonny Roosval. In addition, the catalogues for the former Czechoslovakia and for

Portugal are complete. With some falling off in the rate of publication after this initial momentum, but with more countries joining the project. The published volumes now number fifty (including special studies), with one or two being added each year.⁶

Through various changes since its inception, including the extension of its historical scope to include glass up to about 1700 (at the discretion of each national committee), the project has remained under the prestigious auspices of the CIHA and UAI, with some funding for its administration from the former. Hans Hahnloser, President of the International Board from 1953 until his death in 1974, was succeeded by Louis Grodecki for life (to 1982). The international organization, with thirteen participating countries, was by then complex enough to require an executive Secretary as well as one or two Vice-Presidents.⁷ The role of the Technical Committee, from its inception in 1962, has been elaborated by Ernst Bacher. Of fundamental importance to exchange of knowledge amongst the *Corpus* authors, and between technical experts and historians, have been biennial colloquia that have been hosted in various countries.

Over the years it has been a constant revelation to see important glass published for the first time. Even within France, whose collections in Paris and Chartres are world-famous, the 14th century windows of the chevet of Saint-Ouen in Rouen brought a completely new awareness of the high quality of this form of painting. The same is true of much of the late medieval glass that is being thoroughly studied in Austria and Germany. This work is demanding, and sometimes necessarily slow; whereas it was common to have access to the glass on the bench just after the War, before it was reinstalled, now it is a question of inspecting it from special scaffolding, or waiting for needed conservation measures. The extremely rich and varied windows of the York churches, which made a great impact on the authors who attended the Colloquium there in 1972, still await full study—all but the Great West Window of the Minster, which has been published in a fascicule. In some countries, including England, Austria and France, close collaboration with a National Monuments Record or Historical Monuments Commission has been very fruitful. In west Germany, a fully staffed Study Center has been maintained by funding from various foundations since 1970. Under the direction of Rudiger Becksmann, a team has produced five volumes that are among the most impeccably produced and elabo-

rate of the series. The volumes from the east rival them in quality and quantity. Between them they have adjusted the chronologies of such major collections as those in Erfurt and Regensburg, raised questions of attributions and workshop locations, and made known a quantity of unpublished panels. An even greater quantity of unknown material, in France, has been made rapidly available by the preliminary publication of a summary catalogue or *Recensement*, now nearing completion; a similar series is now planned for Great Britain.

Some of the recent publications in the *Corpus* series have not only extended beyond the original chronological limit of 1480, but have also put aside the question of monumental setting in order to encompass glass in museum collections, including the small silver stained roundels which relate more closely to drawings and prints than to painting.⁸ In the United States, a pre-corpus or *Checklist* has been published of all holdings of glass dating before 1700 in private and public collections, and research is progressing more slowly for definitive catalogues; meanwhile, the material has been made known to European scholars who are likely in many cases to recognize the source of newly discovered panels. For the extensive holdings of The Cloisters and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, years of research by Jane Hayward have resulted in a secured provenance for a large percentage of the pieces. Most recently, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg has begun working toward a complete catalogue of its large collection, in preparation by Elena Shlikevich. The Russian committee has committed itself to an initial bilingual *Checklist* (in Russian and one of the original languages of the *Corpus Vitrearum*, English, French or German). It is regrettable in the international sphere that, at a time when linguistic expertise is not expanding, other countries have departed from this principle. We are fortunate that the scholarly formation and dedication of an earlier generation ensured the volumes were published in German or French instead of Swedish, Danish, Flemish and Czech, and we are fortunate to be able to rely on our Polish colleagues to write in French or German.

None the less, important revisions within art history have come about as a result of the *Corpus* publications. For instance, it is becoming apparent that the traditional emphasis on the study of frescoes and sculpture in quattrocento Italy, to the almost

complete exclusion of painted windows, is not true to the comparative importance of these works at the time they were commissioned.⁹ A similar picture is emerging in Catalonia, where an extraordinary amount of early documentation has provided an historical context for much of the glass; in addition, the only surviving medieval setting table with a cartoon for glass came to light in Gerona Cathedral.¹⁰ Later glass in Spain not only bears out the close relationships with shops from the Low Countries that are known from panel painting, but also offers important examples of styles no longer extant in their place of origin.

It is also increasingly apparent that stained glass is integral to most Gothic and Renaissance church construction programs, and it is more and more in question whether 'architecture' in these cases should be considered apart from the glass and sculpture- the Cathedral of Chartres is a magnificent case in point, as Van der Meulen long ago realized.¹¹ Under the direction of Anne Prache, the team of authors working on *Corpus* entries for the Chartres glass will benefit from her new observations on the building chronology, especially a dating of the aisle vaults by dendochronology, and from Collette Manhes-Deremble's new analysis of the contemporary written sources.¹²

It has been the hope of the ever-increasing number of specialists in the field who participate in the international *Corpus Vitrearum* effort that thorough and complete critical publication of this material will encourage other medievalists to mine its resources. The forty or so full volumes of the *Corpus Vitrearum* that have already been published, and the many in preparation, provide trustworthy guides on questions of authenticity, so that others can use these basic catalogues as they would reliably edited texts.

Notes

1. A. Malraux, *The Voices of Silence I, The Museum without Walls*, Garden City, 1953, p. 89.
2. For instance, in France the Baron François de Guilhermy, whose notes are preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, was a friend of Edouard Didron jeune, the restorer.
3. The Cathedral and Abbey of Saint-Remi in Reims are a tragic case; only the recent restoration of the west rose of the cathedral was well documented by Paul Simon, *La Grande Rose de la Cathédrale de Reims, Reims*, 1911. A national photograph archive had been formed, however, and a selection of images was published by Jules Roussel, *Vitraux du XIIe au XVe siècle*, Paris, 1913.
4. Yves Delaporte & Etienne Houvet, *Les Vitraux de la cathédrale de Chartres*. 4 vols., Chartres, 1926; and Georges Ritter, *Les Vitraux de la cathédrale de Rouen*, Cognac, 1926.

5. Eva Frodl-Kraft, "Institutionen: Das Corpus Vitrearum 1952-1987-Ein Rückblick," *Kunstchronik* 41 (1988), p. 2.
6. The Full list can be found at the end of this volume.
7. François Perrot served as first secretary to 1987 when she was replaced by Yvette Vanden Bemden; Rudiger Becksmann was Vice-President until 1989, when he was succeeded by Ernst Bacher, Anne Prache having been elected a second Vice-President in 1987. Eva Frodl-Kraft (1983-1987) and I were elected under revised by-laws to limited terms as President (my own term will be completed in 1995).
8. A. Fichier international de documentation du rondel (international card catalogue of roundels documentation) was set up at the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique in Brussels in the 1970s, and two supplementary catalogues are now published, one for Great Britain, and one for the USA.
9. The section on San Francisco of Assisi in the volume on Umbria was a revelation, and glass has been included in subsequent monographs on the building, such as that of Hans Belting, *Die Oberkirche von San Francesco in Assisi*, Berlin, 1977. The *Corpus* volume on Florentine glass, begun by Giuseppe Marchini, is awaited.
10. Joan Vila Grau, *El Vitral·l Gótic a Catalunya. Discoberta de la taula de vitraller de Girona*, Barcelona, 1985.
11. J. Van der Meulen, with R. Hoyer and D. Cole, *Chartres: Sources and Literary Interpretation, a critical bibliography*, Boston, 1989, pp. 22-29, esp. p. 25; and his critique of Panofsky and Katzenellenbogen as having "approach (ed) the sculpture of the west facade of Chartres cathedral as though it were applied art," p. 549 // 1994. See also the essays in V. C. Raguin and K. Brusheds., *Artistic Integration in Early Gothic Churches: An Interrogation*, Toronto, in press.
12. To be published in the series of *Corpus Vitrearum: Études*.

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